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Congressional Medal Recipient

GORDON P. ROBERTS FINDS
A LOGICAL REASON FOR HEROISM

DAYTON, Ohio, July 18, 1974 --- Gordon P. Roberts, winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, came to the University of Dayton as a hero, and as he graduates this July 28, he is grateful for one thing--he was not treated like a hero.

"That's the way I wanted it," says Roberts. "I don't feel like a hero, at least the traditional type of hero," he adds. The University of Dayton deferred to Roberts' wishes and did not publicize his presence on campus to outside media. He was honored during half time ceremonies at a football game in 1971 with a standing ovation. "Even then," he recalls, "none of my fellow students said anything about it the following week."

Roberts is quick to explain that he wasn't lost in a crowd. The University of Dayton is a medium size (5,200 full time undergraduate students) Catholic university. "The size has given me a chance to know professors and fellow students in an intimate atmosphere."

Neither does Roberts look like a war hero. He is a slight, soft spoken young man who nevertheless registers his intensity by giving his total attention to whomever he is talking.

Roberts has just the opposite situation in his hometown of Lebanon, Ohio. "For the first year after I came back I don't think there was a night when I didn't get a free dinner and an invitation to speak in front of some organization," he says.

Roberts would rather let his war experiences fade from memory but when he does talk about them or his opinion of amnesty for draft evaders he takes a pragmatic approach, much to the chagrin of some of his hometown admirers, he admits.

"I think those who went to Canada should be given amnesty. The only thing they are guilty of as far as I can see is premature morals. They were saying what most all of us came to believe, that the war was wrong."

"What did they have to do with my experience. They had nothing to do with my going to Vietnam. I was a 17-year-old kid from a small town who didn't know any better. To say differently would be to use them as a scapegoat. If we had listened to them, the war dead wouldn't be dead."

Roberts was a one man army in Vietnam July 11, 1969. The incident was several weeks after Hamburger Hill and in the same vicinity as that famous battle. Most of the members of the squad he was leading were either killed or wounded in an attempt to take a hill that was held by the North Vietnamese. Roberts charged up the hill by himself and knocked out four enemy bunkers singlehanded on his way and after he reached the other side of the hill, helped evacuate the wounded of another platoon.

And yet, when Roberts explains his heroism, he talks as though it was the only choice he had, which of course still does not explain the scarcity of heroes when others are placed in similar positions.

"There were two platoons on each side of the hill trying to take it. It was toward nightfall. We were too scattered to withdraw; besides we might have left some of our wounded. A lot of men in our squad had been hit. If we had stayed there we would have been vulnerable at night. And we kept getting radio messages from the other side of the hill about how they needed help with the evacuation of the wounded."

Roberts even has a logical explanation for the concept of heroism itself. "The most important thing in battle is to keep oneself alive, to not take risks, to survive. Now that may sound selfish, but what people don't realize is that realm of protection also extends to one's comrades, the people you depend on."

The Army treats its heroes well. If he had stayed he would have received an automatic commission, an officer's pay and a free college education. General Westmoreland made the offer known during the decoration ceremony. Roberts replied: "Some people like the Army; some people like to spend their lives in a coal mine. But, its not for me."

Instead, Roberts accepted a four-year presidential scholarship from the University of Dayton and then compressed his studies into three years by taking as high as 20 hours a semester and going to school during the summer. He also served as a justice on the student court, one of the three branches of student government.

His major is sociology which he plans to relate to criminal justice and law. "I see law as something that needs a big change. But, in order to change it, you have to find out why its that way and find an alternative to change it to," Roberts says.

After a year's hiatus at Denver University in Colorado where his wife of six months, Mary Roberts, will finish her degree in psychology, Roberts hopes to enter law school. Although, his presidential scholarship at UD is related to his heroism, Roberts says he does not plan to use his medal to gain him admission to graduate school.

"The medal does not indicate in any way, my ability to perform well in school," he says. "My grades and my board scores will determine that," says the modest hero.